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Remote-Control Superspy

There's a valuable lesson for Pentagon planners in the shooting down of the South Korean airliner. It's a lesson that could save lives and money in the continuing Cold War intelligence gathering—if the Air Force brass will only heed it.

The incident has given an additional arguing point to those in government who advocate the use of remotely piloted vehicles to carry out vital but dangerous flights over Soviet territory. These low-flying, unmanned drone planes are not only far cheaper to build than heavier, manned aircraft but burn so little fuel they can stay aloft many times longer. They are also nearly impossible to shoot down.

Actually, it shouldn't have taken the Korean airline massacre to hammer home to the Air Force the lesson that manned planes are dangerously vulnerable. If it had been the U.S. reconnaissance plane that had strayed into Soviet air space, it too would have been a sitting duck for the Russian fighter pilots.

A top-secret report, prepared by an interagency group that included CIA experts, has urged President Reagan to consider greater use of RPVs. My associate, Dale Van Atta, has seen a copy of the report.

Along with more and better spy satellites, the group wrote, "remotely piloted vehicles, possibly using stealth technology, should be reviewed for possible tactical intelligence-collecting value and for strategic intelligence collection. . . ." The drones could be launched from larger reconnaissance planes.

Besides their intelligence-gathering advantages, the pilotless planes have a proven combat value. This was dramatically and convincingly demonstrated last year by the Israelis in the early stages of their attack into Lebanon.

The Israeli military's biggest fear was the devastating potential of the Russian surface-to-air missile batteries the Syrians had deployed near the strategic Bekaa Valley. Most were SA6 missiles, the kind that wreaked such terrible destruction on the Israeli air force in the 1973 Yom Kippur war.

But 1982 was a different story. To the astonishment of the Syrians and the Soviets (and the Pentagon, too), the Israelis in two days destroyed all 19 SA6 missile batteries without the loss of a single plane. One key to their success was the use of RPVs. They not only gathered intelligence but acted as decoys to lure the Syrians into firing on them and giving away the position of their batteries—which the Israeli air force then wiped out.

Ironically, the Israeli RPVs were based on technology developed by the United States and tried out during the Vietnam War. Yet the American RPV program has been under-planned and under-funded. There is no American RPV in operation today; a drone being developed by the Army won't be ready until 1988.

Even in their Vietnam heyday, the United States' RPVs were never exploited to full advantage, though their record was impressive. They flew more than 3,000 highly classified missions, photographing targets for manned bombers, recording post-strike damage, dropping propaganda leaflets and discovering unsuspected targets.

Essentially, the RPVs are highly sophisticated model airplanes, controlled from the ground with far greater speed and maneuverability than piloted aircraft. The little planes were more than a match for North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gunners: The "casualty" rate was only 10 percent.

And when they do get shot down, nobody dies.

Why, then, with all these advantages, is the RPV an orphan in the Pentagon? The GAO, in a report on RPVs, came up with an astounding answer: "pro-pilot bias . . . a perception of RPVs as too drab and unexciting to generate much enthusiasm."

Running a pilotless proxy from the safety of a rear-echelon control panel would be the equivalent of kitchen police duty for the former fliers who control the budget.

They don't want to deprive junior officers of the thrills and promotions that pilots enjoy—even though the humdrum little RPVs could help them survive to a less eventful old age.